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ABSTRACT

Although many educational institutions and private groups have offered experiences to encourage androgyny among participants, research dealing with such efforts has generally found no significant changes. The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) was administered to 2 groups of 30 undergraduate women enrolled in the same women's studies course at the beginning of the fall 1978 and the fall 1980 semesters. At the end of the 1978 semester, the BSRI was readministered to the first group. Pre- and post-test scores for the 1978 group yielded positive, statistically significant gains in androgyny. Increases in Masculinity scores did not correspond strongly or systematically with decreases in Femininity scores, suggesting the androgyny can be stimulated and encouraged without "masculinizing" women at the expense of healthy traditional feminine traits. Comparisons of 1978 and 1980 groups found no differences in sex-role orientations, indicating that the informal impact of the women's movement alone may be incapable of fostering short-term measurable changes in the sex-role attitudes of college women. (NRB)

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The Progress of Self-Reported Androgynous Behavior in College Women

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Paper presented at the Eighth Annual National Conference of the Association for Women in Psychology, March 5-8, 1981, Boston, Massachusetts.

The Progress of Self-Reported Androgynous Behavior in College Women

The purposes of this study were to investigate the independent effects of the women's movement and a field-based women's studies course on the sex-role attitudes of college women. The study was specifically concerned with examining whether or not a "ceiling effect" was operating on college women electing a women's studies course; if such a course encourages greater masculinity with simultaneous rejection of femininity, and if the impact of the women's movement is independently sufficient to foster measurable changes in the sex-role attitudes of college women.

Theoretical Framework

With the advent of the modern women's movement, many educational institutions and private groups have attempted to introduce formal experiences designed to encourage participants to become more androgynous. The research dealing with such efforts has generally failed to measure any significant changes, particularly at the college level (Applegarth, 1976; Coffman, 1978; Kahn, 1975; Rapin, 1974). Borod (1976) suggested the failure of the course effectiveness in her study might be related to a "ceiling effect" due to the probability that students enrolling in a women's studies course are already quite liberal. Mashkin's (1977) assertiveness training treatment for college women did yield some significant changes in behavior but reported these changes to be the result of a move toward greater masculinity with simultaneous rejection of feminine endorsements rather than the general flexiblity associated with psychological androgyny.

Related research has also sought to determine if the impact of the women's movement on the media and society in general was independently sufficient to evidence measurable attitudinal changes in women without the benefit of formal intervention techniques. Parelius (1975) and Mason, Czajka and Arter (1976)

analyzed a series of women's surveys taken between 1969-1973, and 1964-1974 and reported considerable attitudinal movement toward feminism and/or egalitarian role definitions.

The present study was borne out of a challenge to develop a women's studies course designed to maximize androgyny and the goals of feminism without disparaging the healthy aspects of either traditionally feminine or masculine behavior traits. It further sought to determine the progress of attitudinal change in college women outside the confines of structured feminist course experiences.

Procedures

The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI)(Bem, 1971) was administered to two groups of 30 undergraduate women enrolled in the same women's studies course at the beginning of the Fall, 1978 (Group I) and Fall, 1980 (Group II) semesters. At the end of the 1978 semester, the BSRI was readministered to Group I.

The course format included assigned readings, lectures, discussions and a series of twenty-five field-bases research projects designed to investigate various aspects of sexism in contemporary American society. The projects included, but were not limited to analyzing the media (children's television programs and cartoons, prime time commercials, magazines, major sales catalogs, daily newspapers, etc.), the schools (curricula, textbooks, faculty and administrative practices), local libraries, business and employment. It was anticipated that a variety of field-based research experiences would increase student awareness beyond the levels attainable in a traditional lecture-discussion approach.

Appropriate t-tests and Pearson correlations were computed to determine the independence of the M-F scales, and whether or not significant changes in sex-role orientations had occurred.

Results

Pre and post-test scores for Group I yielded positive gains in androgyny that were statistically significant ($p \leq .05$, two-tailed). Analysis of pre and post M and F scores for Group I indicated mean Masculinity scores increased ($p \leq .0001$) while mean Femininity scores decreased ($p \leq .05$). Further analysis of the relationship between the score changes yielded a non-significant Pearson product moment correlation of .216. Correlation coefficients for M and F in both pre and post-tests for Group I indicated the scales to be highly independent of each other ($r=.007$, $r=.056$). Pretest scores for Groups I and II on M, F, and A yielded no significant differences on a two-tailed t-test indicating relatively no change in sex-role attitudes of entering students over time.

Discussion

The so-called "ceiling effect" described by Borod (1976) did not surface in this study. The results suggest that women expressing an interest in women's studies by enrolling in such a course have not necessarily reached their potential for psychological androgyny, nor are they necessarily fully aware of either the internal or external constraints of sex-role stereotyping.

It was further determined that unlike Mashkin's (1977) subjects who reportedly moved toward greater masculinity at the expense of feminine endorsements, the subjects in the present study evidenced increases in their M scores which did not correspond strongly or in any systematic way with the changes in their F scores. Although both changes were significant, the levels of significance were very different. The M scores were altered far more than the F scores. In androgynous fashion, the subjects retained the value of most tradiational feminine behavior traits, rejected others, and simultaneously incorporated more traditional male traits into their behavior repetoire.

It appears then that androgyny can be stimulated and encouraged without "masculinizing" females at the expense of healthy traditional feminine traits.

Finally, the data determined that women enrolled in a women's studies course in 1978 were no different in their sex-role orientations from women enrolling in the same course two years later.

Therefore, it appears that while women expressing an interest in women's studies by enrolling in such a course have not necessarily reached an awareness ceiling, women in general may have reached an awareness plateau. Specifically, it is suggested that once the more blatant aspects of the limitations of stereotypic behavior and attitudes have filtered through society via the general efforts of the women's movement, the early feminist gains as reported by Parelius (1975) and Mason, et. al. (1976) may have leveled off so that the rate of sex-role attitude change in college women decreases significantly outside the confines of planned intervention techniques.

Thus, it appears that undergraduate women may not be progressively changing their attitudes about sex-role orientations outside the confines of structured and focused women's studies experiences. In other words it is suggested that the informal impact of the women's movement alone may be incapable of independently continuing to foster short-term measurable changes in the sex-role attitudes of college women.

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